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July 27, 2009

## Obama Allows US to See Color

By **David Paul Kuhn**

Barack Obama did not herald in a "post-racial America." In fact, the trope betrayed how we confine race to superficial terms. It's the same reason Stephen Colbert has made a standing joke of not being able to "see color." Color is with us. And we cannot get past race by not directly looking at it.

Obama's presence has empowered us to take that look. Obama has not changed how we experience race. But he is changing how we see and talk about it.

We are beginning to value sincerity more than sensitivity. Though not without friction, race seems to be leaving the politically correct era. The emphasis on anesthetic rhetoric dulled raw emotions. And we were left with guarded conversations about race that were skin deep.

Eric Holder seemed to try, in part, to make this point. Earlier this year, the first black attorney general said that the United States is "a nation of cowards" when discussing race. It was a controversial remark and poorly expressed. It was also honest.

But Holder's side of the debate was also a significant bully. Liberals' good fight to sensitize us, and therefore our language, reached exaggerated terms by the 1990s. We came to experience a whistle-prone refereeing of language. The penalties became as prolific as they were pernicious. Many Americans soon decided to avoid full-contact topics, none more than race.

Then Obama happened. With him we've had: the Rev. Jeremiah Wright debate, Holder's words, the Ricci affirmative action case and now the Henry Louis Gates Jr. incident. Americans appear to be talking about race in more honest terms.

The irony of the first black president was always his effort to avoid the subject of race. Obama's hand was forced by Wright's controversial sermons. Obama's acclaimed race speech followed. But soon we saw that while Obama called for a conversation about race, he was as silent on the subject as possible. Obama's circle believed he could not be typecast as a black candidate and also become the first black president.

Last week, Obama ignored that script for the first time. He made his most sincere remark about race since his speech, now more than a year ago. Obama spoke not as a president who happens to be black, but as a president who is also a black man.

Obama was not framing other people's racial prism. He exhibited it. The Vulcan was refreshingly human, and his voice resonates all the more for it.

This latest incident began with an eminent black Harvard scholar of black culture, Henry Louis Gates Jr. Gates was locked out of his own home. A neighbor saw what looked like men breaking into Gates' home. It was Gates. But when cops confronted Gates there was confrontation, and Gates was eventually arrested.

The incident was between a black man and a white policeman. And therefore, many commentators first instinct was to explain the incident in racial terms. And so was the president's.

Obama said the Cambridge officers "acted stupidly" in arresting Gates. He spoke of Gates as a metaphor for the national problem of racial profiling.

But Obama was also racial profiling in the broader sense. Obama presumed that the color of those involved explained the outcome. It fit a common narrative. But then we discovered a black cop was also present. We learned the white officer had taught a racial profiling class for five years and once gave mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to save the life of black basketball star Reggie Lewis.

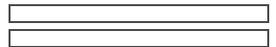
Obama walked back the comments by week's end. He said the uproar caused by his remarks

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was "unfortunate" and agreed to the idea to invite the white cop and the scholar for a beer. It was a good recovery for a bad fumble. And we were better for the discussion.

Obama advanced the conversation not by framing both sides of the race-divide, but by personally exhibiting a product of that divide.

Initially, there was an unhealthy Disney narrative to Obama's historic candidacy. Obama was being celebrated for what he said about us--that nearly all white Iowa made him a contender or that a black man could be president.

The Wright debacle first forced us to face the other side of the story. Obama's historic significance evoked the dreams deferred before him. And those scars lingered. The debate over Wright was sometimes ugly or simplistic. But we were at least having it.

As months went on in the campaign, whites were beginning to feel more unburdened with Obama. They felt the weight of a racist history lifting. Obama is the ultimate icon of black male success, an affirmation of meritocracy. And blacks had more reason to believe in that meritocracy because of Obama. But the converse was also true.

Obama's success has led us to examine potentially racist incidents more closely. Each incident reminds us that racial America did not end with the 43 white men who preceded him.

So we now talk more about race. Sometimes it will be black and white. Sometimes not. Even this president can slip into racial generalizations. But the talk feels more authentic and useful.

Gates was therefore not a reminder that the idea of a "post-racial America" is a myth. It was a reminder that Obama's success has allowed for the myth. And when reality competes with that myth, we are still ultimately left with a more substantial conversation on race in American life.

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